

This article was downloaded by: [Monash University]

On: 28 September 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 907465088]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Research Papers in Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713707783>

School-community links: supporting learning in the middle years

Debra Hayes ^a; Andrew Chodkiewicz ^b

^a Griffith University, Australia ^b University of Technology, Australia

Online Publication Date: 01 March 2006

To cite this Article Hayes, Debra and Chodkiewicz, Andrew(2006)'School-community links: supporting learning in the middle years',Research Papers in Education,21:1,3 — 18

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/02671520500445409

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02671520500445409>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

School–community links: supporting learning in the middle years

Debra Hayes^{a*} and Andrew Chodkiewicz^b

^aGriffith University, Australia; ^bUniversity of Technology, Australia

This paper reports on research into how schools, parents and local communities work together to support students' learning during the transition from primary to secondary schools in what is referred to as the middle years of schooling. The research was conducted in four Australian schools within one urban school district. These schools were located in low-income communities and had high numbers of bilingual students. We mapped existing school–community links that support student learning by identifying key participants and describing how they perceive these links—particularly in relation to improving students' engagement in learning. Our approach was qualitative in nature, utilizing interviews and focus groups. We found that students, families and teachers commonly expressed the view that learning is limited to schooling; that contacts between schools and communities about learning are difficult to negotiate and are heavily mediated by school principals; and we describe a lack of consensus about the nature of communities and the potential of school community links to contribute to enhancing student learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Disadvantage; Disengagement; Middle years; School–community*

Introduction

The interface between schools and communities is a boundary that contains and excludes, whilst affording limited views across it. Despite this, students make a daily transition from the culture, customs and language of their homes and communities to those of their schools. They make this transition with varying degrees of ease; some cross it easily and willingly, whilst others cross it with difficulty and reluctantly. Those positioned on opposite sides of this interface (teachers and district personnel on one side and parents and community workers on the other) have limited opportunities for dialogue and for understanding each other. In this paper, we explore this interface in an urban Australian public school district, and we report on how some students,

*Corresponding author. School of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Faculty of Education, Griffith University, Logan Campus L08 1.45, University Drive, Meadowbrook, QLD 4131, Australia. Email: debra.hayes@uts.edu.au

teachers, parents and community workers in four schools experience school–community links. The literature in this field emphasizes the increased importance of school–community links for students at risk of disengaging from schooling (those who cross with difficulty and reluctantly). For this reason, we have chosen to focus on these students and to concentrate our efforts on describing their experiences and concerns, as well as those of their teachers and parents. We have drawn upon a range of qualitative approaches, including interviews and focus groups. Our findings suggest that there is a need for active communication between schools and their communities to build shared understandings of the nature of community and of learning. This communication should recognize that learning takes place beyond the school, and that parents, siblings, extended family and members of the community (as well as teachers) have a role to play in facilitating young people’s achievement of a broad range of academic and social learning outcomes.

Background

Our research grew out of a collaboration that was initiated to support the improvement of learning outcomes of students in four schools—two primary schools (Kindergarten to Year 6) and two high schools (Years 7–12) in Sydney’s inner suburbs.¹ The specific focus of the collaboration was on students in the middle school years (Years 5–8 or roughly 10- to 13-years-old) from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds.² Participants in the collaboration included the district superintendent and other district personnel; the managers and coordinators of programs targeting low SES students; parents and other community representatives; academic researchers; and executive staff from four schools in the district. This research draws upon participants in the collaboration to investigate the question: *how might schools, parents and local communities work together to support students’ learning?*

Whilst numerous studies have investigated the nature of school–community relationships, for the most part these relationships have been shown to focus on providing coordinated health and welfare services, and in later school years on vocational educational opportunities. Current debates on globalization and the new knowledge economy, suggest that there is a need to interrogate the place of learning in school–society relationships. For example, Gee (2000) claims that many public schools in the US are ill-suited to producing students who will be able to understand and survive in new capitalism because they continue to stress skill-and-drill and basic skills over conceptual understandings. A large-scale survey of teachers conducted by the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study suggests that this may also be true of Australian schools (School of Education, University of Queensland, 2001). Young (1998) notes that, despite the ideological and rhetorical character of descriptions of a learning society, there are real social changes underlying growing interest in this concept:

Although more importance must be given to learning at work, learning outside school and in adult life generally, the crucial implication of this shift in emphasis for educational policy and theory is the new relationships between school and non-school learning which need to be developed. (Young, 1998, p. 2)

Within these emerging contexts, we felt it necessary to investigate the existence and nature of school–community links aimed at supporting the engagement of students in learning in the middle school years. Our first line of inquiry was to map existing links within the participating schools in order to identify those with a focus on learning. We then conducted a series of interviews and focus groups.

The four participating schools are located within three suburbs that are among the most disadvantaged parts of Sydney, which are characterized by low levels of income and high rates of unemployment. Even so, they are rich and varied multicultural communities, with many different language and cultural organizations based in the area. These organizations provide information and support to numerous language groups—notably Turkish, Arabic, Vietnamese and Chinese. There are also growing Pacific Islander and Korean communities. As a result, more than 80% of the students at each school are from non-English speaking backgrounds. Each school also has high levels of mobility of teachers and students, and lower than average retention and attendance rates. In the following literature review, we focus on the factors that have been identified as impacting on students' disengagement from schooling during the middle years, since it is during this period that the pattern of absence, truancy and withdrawal that signals students' imminent departure from school emerges (Johnston, 1992).

Student disengagement in the middle years

Prior research identifies a mix of social, economic and educational factors that are responsible for student disengagement from schooling in the middle years. It is a challenge for educators and communities to develop effective programs that address these factors when, as Thomson (1998) explains, there is 'a growing group of young people who have decided that there is little point to schooling' (p. 8). Thomson has consistently sought explanations for this disengagement from within and beyond schools. In a study of 'rustbelt' (former industrial) communities in South Australia, Thomson (2002) describes families under extreme economic pressures, diminishing support from non-Government agencies, and growing hostility in school–parent interactions.

Some writers have attempted to better understand the nature of the alienation experienced by young people in order to develop more appropriate and effective ways of keeping students on at school. Focusing on students' perspectives, Cumming (1996) found that successful student engagement programs improved the sense of belonging of students. They allowed students to actively engage in the curriculum, had a practical orientation, and included some non-school options such as work experience, pre-vocational and life skills training.

It has long been acknowledged that a factor in student alienation and disengagement from learning is social class (Connell *et al.*, 1982 ; Lareau, 1989). In this process, schools tend to act as conservative and constraining forces (Bourdieu, 1974), especially in disadvantaged areas. Connell (1997) has argued that struggles around student learning and democratization of the curriculum may involve a loss of both professional and cultural authority for schools—especially teachers. As a result the

kinds of relationships that develop in each school among families, local communities and their schools are shaped by factors of class and authority.

Student engagement in learning is influenced by parental involvement, and this appears to be particularly critical in low-income families. In a review of the literature, Heymann and Earle (2000) identified a number of insights into parental involvement. These insights include:

- Parental involvement is important for the success of children at school.
- Having a supportive adult helps a child learn skills after school, making a difference even if the adult has no training in how to help children.
- Teaching adults how to help children is effective across social class.
- Adult involvement is even more important for children with learning and behaviour difficulties.
- Parental involvement in classroom programs, school events and meetings is important.

Heymann and Earle (2000) also highlighted their findings from their own study of the non-financial barriers to parental involvement in their child's education. Focusing on working class parents who had at least one child in need of help because of educational or behavioural problems, they found:

Nationwide low-income parents are significantly more likely than middle- and upper-income parents to lack the paid leave and flexibility to help children who are doing poorly academically and children who have frequent behaviour problems. (Heymann & Earle, 2000, p. 842)

Drawing upon extensive work with disadvantaged middle and high school students, Clark (1992) highlighted the contribution to students' success at school of interactions in various settings such as the home, school, neighbourhoods and other community institutions, like churches, recreation centres, even grocery stores, and playgrounds. Clark suggested that school success depends on the amount of constructive learning activity carried on by students outside of school. Key out of school components include:

- Deliberate out of school learning such as homework, study, tutorials, part time work, or learning an instrument or a language.
- Leisure activities that involve reading, writing, problem-solving, or decision-making.
- Recreational activities like watching TV, playing games, doing hobbies, or group sports.
- Health maintenance activities (p. 70).

In another study, Shumow *et al.* (1999) assessed the impact of urban neighbourhoods on students from low-income families. They followed students' academic performance from Grade 3 to Grade 5 and concluded that as children become more aware of their neighbourhood, it can exert a negative influence—by Grade 5 it can become a risk factor. Importantly, they found that parental involvement can offset the negative impact of neighbourhood risk and suggested that high quality programs sponsored by community agencies may contribute positively to student learning.

Research into school–community partnerships has emerged as an area of policy interest among educational administrators in North America and the UK. Similarly, in Australia there have been a number of national (DETYA, 2001a, b, d) and state studies (DSP, 1999a, b; DET, 2001), including reports of school–community programs or activities. Generally speaking, much of the Australian literature is written from the perspective of schools and educational administrators, which places the school at the centre of student learning—locating the school as the dominant player in any relationship involving student learning. In addition, many studies are descriptive, outlining projects and programs, with few studies focused specifically on supporting student learning in the middle school years. In this research, we have attempted to shift the focus towards communities by including the perspective of parents, community workers and students at risk of disengaging from schooling.

Methodology

The methodology used in this project was qualitative in nature and designed to identify existing school–community links within four schools in the one district; and to capture and describe the experiences of school- and community-based personnel, as well as students at risk of disengaging from schooling and their parents. There were many difficulties associated with interviewing the parents of students who participated in the study, these related mainly to language barriers and work and family commitments. As a result, we were only able to interview a small number of parents—but they have provided valuable insights into the nature and potential of school–community links to support their children’s learning. We relied heavily upon the four schools to facilitate our access to their students and parents. Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) provided translation where necessary and teachers organized student focus groups. The close involvement of the schools shaped the research in particular ways. For example, it was a requirement that a teacher be present during focus groups’ meetings with students.

Methods

An initial mapping of the participants in school–community links who have the potential to impact on students’ learning was carried out by drawing on the local knowledge of school and district personnel, and a search of local council service directories and telephone directories. A series of interviews were organized with selected key participants in schools, the district office, representatives of local community organizations and Government agencies. This was followed by a number of focus groups with students and interviews with parents. Researchers also attended a school parent meeting at each of the two high schools, as well as a district community consultative meeting.

Interviews

Face to face interviews were conducted with key staff in the four schools (including the principals, assistant or deputy principal), the district office, government agencies

and local community organizations. Interviews were conducted with parents over the phone. These parents had also given permission for their children to take part in student focus groups. The children of the parents were evenly split across primary and high schools. Most of the parents we spoke to were mothers.

Some of the specific questions we asked all participants included:

- Describe your local community.
- Describe links between schools and their local communities.
- What are key issues related to student learning and engagement?
- What do you think are the main barriers to school–community links?

Focus groups

As previously mentioned, the students selected for the focus group discussions were identified by teachers as being at risk of disengaging from schooling. The focus groups were organized and run with the support of teachers in each school. In the two primary schools, the focus groups were composed of girls and boys in Year 5; and Year 8 girls from one high school took part. A number of efforts were made to organize a group of either Year 7 or Year 8 boys at the boys' high school but without any success—there were difficulties associated with obtaining the necessary parental permissions.

Limitations of the study

It is well documented that there is a high correlation between low SES status and lower retention rates, but anecdotal evidence and local indicators suggest that the four schools in our study were retaining students at higher rates than other similar schools. It should be noted that our exclusive focus on students at risk of disengaging from schooling reflects, necessarily, a limited picture of the broader experiences of students in the participating schools. The necessity of obtaining written permission from parents or guardians became a limiting factor for including students in the study. The lack of resources to employ interpreters prevented the inclusion of parents from backgrounds other than English, except through descriptions of their involvement in school-based meetings that were translated by the CLOs.

Mapping of existing school–community links that support learning

The first line of inquiry in this study was to map existing school–community links. We included *student-focused* links based in schools and communities; *parent-focused* links aimed at supporting basic communication and family development; and *community-focused* links coordinated at the district and school level. A key feature of the student-focused links was that they generally targeted students at risk of disengaging from schooling. All aimed to support student engagement in learning, to maintain attendance, or help modify student behaviour. They included homework programs, lateness and attendance monitoring and various support programs.

There were a range of parent-focused programs and activities operating in the district and the four schools in this study. They included district programs, school organized classes, and school sessions specifically for parents. These activities were of the type described as basic communication or family development; we saw limited evidence of activities that would be described as community outreach or advocacy (Shepard *et al.*, 1999).

A major development in recent years at the four schools and across other schools in the district was the growth in programs targeting family development. These aimed to develop parents' abilities to support student learning at home. They included programs on literacy, computing, understanding and managing behaviour and child development, as well as assisting some parents to improve their English language skills or learn more about cultural differences. These programs supplemented more traditional activities organized by schools that provided opportunities for parent–teacher interactions; ensured parents were sent out basic information; and involved a small proportion of parents in the Parent and Citizens Committee and other community consultative meetings. Parents from the largest non-English speaking communities at the two high schools were encouraged and assisted in their involvement in these aspects by staff with related language skills.

The main community-focused links that we identified at the district and school level operated through interagency forums that facilitated the access of community-based organizations to school principals. We also mapped numerous examples of community use of school facilities and a range of cultural events organized by local councils and/or community organizations. However, like the UK experiences of school–community partnerships reported by Martin and Tett (1999), school use of facilities did not translate into participation of the community in decision-making.

Key participants and how they perceive existing links

Students

During the focus groups, students expressed a fairly narrow view of what learning involved and focused predominantly on learning within schools and classrooms. When describing support beyond school, they generally limited their comments to family interactions:

If you find that it's a bit hard ... you can get your parents to help you. (Year 5 girl)

My sister helps sometimes. If it's hard she tells [me] how to work it out and then I can do the rest myself. (Year 5 boy)

There was limited evidence of student involvement in community-based activities that had a central focus on learning. However, the Year 5 students expressed positive attitudes towards such opportunities and could identify people and places that could provide them with learning opportunities beyond school. But these attitudes and understandings were not as evident in Year 8 students.

For all students, relationships with teachers were seen as key contributors to their learning. The Year 8 students described these relationships mainly in negative terms. They noted difficulties communicating with some teachers. They also felt that some were disrespectful to them, did not listen and were unwilling to help them in class.

The reason why we're bad is because we don't like school. ... We don't like the teachers. ... We're actually ratbags and ... if you try to be good, like they won't see you like that. ... You never have a chance to improve ...

These students perceived their categorization as 'bad students' and as being 'at risk' as a function of how they were positioned in schools by teachers, and not in terms of their own behaviour, background or ability. They were despairing of this status changing and frustrated by how it positioned them within schooling discourses—teachers had low expectations of them and they missed out on learning opportunities. They were able to articulate the type of learning they valued and enjoyed in school but they had limited expectations of being able to shape their learning experiences within or beyond the school. 'I want to be a doctor, but in the school we don't learn, so how would we become a doctor?' (Year 8 girl).

Self-fulfilling prophecies were at play here as the students demonstrated the type of behaviour that their teachers found problematic, but within the noise and disorder of the focus group the students offered insights into their understanding of how schooling was failing them.

First day I was back at school: the first day we were back for some time and they were still seeing the same face. Like if you try and be good, like they won't see you like that. (Student 1)

You never have a chance to improve. (Student 2)

On a practical level, school–community links are important for students at risk of disengaging from schooling because they provide access to learning supports that may not otherwise be available. Our focus groups also emphasized the significance that students place on the quality of their relationships with their teachers. Positive socially supportive relationships contribute to their sense of belonging. They expressed anger at being constituted in ways that reflected factors outside their control. They viewed their at-risk status as an effect of schooling discourses rather than an effect of their behaviour or background. They expressed a sense of frustration with their position in the school and acknowledged their inability to shift this positioning despite their efforts.

Parents

All the parents we interviewed indicated a strong commitment to supporting their children's learning but they also spoke of problems communicating with teachers and understanding schooling practices. Those whose children experienced learning difficulties were particularly frustrated by cultural and communication barriers, as illustrated below:

Mostly I do talk to her class teacher, she says she explains things to [my daughter], but they only have time to say it once and that's the problem, in Fiji they keep on going over it until you understand it.

Parents also identified specific learning difficulties they felt needed to be addressed, including reading, maths and doing homework. They were understandably concerned that if these problems were not addressed it would lead to future disengagement from school and learning. Despite the difficulties they identified, parents of Year 5 students were hopeful that teachers could make a difference. They also turned to people in their immediate neighbourhood to help address these issues. However, the parents of Year 8 students were expressing real concerns about how their children were being treated by some teachers and the ability of their children to stay engaged in learning. They also identified specific student learning difficulties, including homework, behaviour and school attendance. Like their children, they focused mainly on teachers who were seen as the key people who could make a difference to their child's engagement with learning.

Most of the parents indicated that they wanted to get help to support their child's learning as they did not feel that they had the skills to address these issues, and they felt powerless to stop their move towards disengagement.

If anything we'd be the ones able to help because we know our child's weaknesses and we can help. ... I've spoken to a few teachers ... a few, not her class teacher, no, not the principal. The school could [hold] meetings about education, about ways to further help [my child's] studies, there's a lot of need in our community, we need to get help to support our children, it's important.

By Year 8 some parents were starting to give up trying to make contact at school and were looking outside the school for help. Some had already found alternative pathways and were encouraging their son or daughter to move into vocational learning.

The limited understanding demonstrated by these parents about how to support young people's learning is commonly constructed as a lack of interest or ability on the part of parents. However, those we interviewed demonstrated high levels of problem-solving and perseverance in their attempts to understand and participate in schooling discourse. Despite their efforts they described growing frustrations and, like their children, were at risk of disengaging from schools.

Although the schools were making efforts to communicate and include parents, most of the parents we spoke to wanted more information and a widening of the opportunities for them to be involved in schools. Both parents and teachers acknowledged the value of parental involvement, however where mechanisms existed for involving them these only allowed access to a narrow range of opportunities. And school personnel generally expressed little confidence in the capacity of some parents—especially those of students considered to be at risk of disengaging from school—to contribute to their child's learning (see also Fine & Weiss, 2003).

According to parents, the main barriers to effective school–community links were:

- Poor communication with teachers about student learning issues.
- Lack of information from schools about educational programs.

- Language barriers.
- Lack of interest by school staff.

There is a sense in which these parents recognize the role of schooling in contributing to their child's life opportunities but they feel generally powerless to guarantee or claim this as a right.

Schools

The schools in the study had been broadening the way they go about links with parents. They have moved from a narrow view that focuses on providing information about school activities, student progress and test results, to a broader one that takes into account the need to further develop parents' skills. This approach recognizes there are a number of barriers to parental involvement in schooling; it seeks to address language and cultural barriers whilst developing specific skills to help parents support students' learning.

Various programs or one-off sessions were being organized with the involvement of other educational providers or community agencies to help parents develop specific skills such as English language proficiency, literacy, talking and listening, computing, and ways of managing children's behaviour. There was also a program to help newly arrived parents better handle resettlement issues.

Language barriers were a major and persistent concern among all parents for whom English is not their first language. Embracing cultural differences among parents has prompted some schools to commit resources to reaching out to parents from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB)—especially the largest language groups. Strategies that have been effective include translating documents that are sent home, providing simultaneous interpretation of meetings and the employment of Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) who can speak with parents in their first language.

The resources and organizational structures of schools compared to parents and communities will ensure that schools remain the drivers of school–community links. The challenges for schools are to identify and reach diverse communities; to embrace cultural difference; recognize the views, concerns and interests of various stakeholders; support a broad understanding of learning; and recognize the opportunities for learning beyond the school fence.

School executives

There was general agreement among school executives (principals, deputies, assistant principals) that links with community organizations become more important in the later years of schooling. In contrast to the views expressed by students, school executives considered that students became more aware of their communities and open to what they have to offer as they get older.

The prevailing motivation expressed by executives for establishing links with communities was in terms of how these links could benefit the school and its programs

through additional funding and resources. There was very limited recognition of how the school could resource and contribute to the community, nor how the community could contribute to school programs and student learning. However, it should be acknowledged that lack of time and resources for school staff were identified as major factors limiting the development of stronger links with local communities.

Primary school executives were generally satisfied with their existing mechanisms (parent representatives and P&C committees) for communicating with parents and the local community. While high school executives recognized the need for other community consultative mechanisms (including CLOs and community meetings). Both primary and secondary executives considered that the primary purpose of these mechanisms was to provide and receive information.

Teachers

Teachers acknowledged that it was a major challenge to link up with parents. Despite efforts to organize programs and activities to facilitate this, teachers were aware that they were not reaching some parents at all—especially parents of those students who were experiencing learning difficulties or were at risk of disengaging from school. As previously noted, the parents that we interviewed in this category shared a desire for better communication with teachers. This suggests that it is important to examine the structural barriers produced by schools that limit this form of communication.

There was a strong sense that the key link in the middle school years was between teachers and students; that this is a time when students needed the most support; and that it is also when teachers felt they could still make a difference. Our interviews with students at risk of disengaging from schooling in Years 5 and 8 confirm the critical role that relationships with teachers play in the levels of satisfaction they express with their participation and success at school.

Community-focused personnel

Each school district employs a number of Community Information Officers, a Community Development Officer and various consultants to work on school–community issues across the district. In addition, all four schools employed school-based Community Liaison Officers, who played a critical role in involving parents and the community in the school through a range of formal and informal mechanisms. They also helped the school reach into the community and understand its particular features. At one of the high schools, the central and prominent location of the CLOs office (beside the principal's office) is seen as an important symbol and mechanism for encouraging parental involvement in the school.

There were a number of factors identified by school and district office staff as barriers to more effective school–community links. They included:

- The lack of time and resources.
- The difficulties of making connections with parents.

- The cultural and social diversity among the local community.
- The culture of the school.
- Lack of school–community ‘champions’ in a school.
- Lack of appropriate skills in the community on student learning issues.
- School–community links are not a core activity and are of marginal value to student learning.

At the district level, there was general recognition of the importance of the district- and school-based consultative forums as a means of networking among schools and local community organizations and service providers. However, we note that most of these fall within the categories of parental involvement identified by Shepard *et al.* (1999) as basic communication and family development. There is limited support for initiatives that would fall within the categories in this model related to community outreach and advocacy.

This study highlights the importance of the work being carried out by Community Liaison Officers at schools and district consultants as they provide assistance with further developing the links between schools, families and local community organizations, and with focusing these links on improving student learning and engagement in the middle school years.

Local community organizations

In the district there were a number of important community consultative mechanisms and networks at a district and school level. They included a district advisory committee, a joint community consultative group, and inter-agencies involved with families and young people. These processes mainly involved the district high schools and were an important way of sharing information and making initial contact. They seemed to provide a good basis for developing and strengthening further school–community links.

A feature across the district was the range of community cultural events that were organized throughout the year. Some were based in schools but an increasing number were being organized in the local community and provided schools with various learning opportunities for their students. Consultative mechanisms were providing schools with links with their local council and community organizations and the opportunity to work collaboratively on various community-based cultural events.

There was a real interest among community workers to be more engaged with their local schools in local events or programs. Local council staff, police, youth centres and welfare organizations all indicated an interest in strengthening their links with local schools. They said they valued the opportunities to take part in community consultative processes—particularly at the district and high school level.

In relation to student learning, community workers felt they had only a minor role to play and that this was limited to specific programs, or sessions like homework support, drop-in programs, crime prevention workshops, or organizing community cultural activities.

A number of community organizations were running programs in conjunction with schools for those students who were disengaging. These programs involved high schools working with a local community agency to try and re-engage students in learning and explore pathways into further education. There were also a number of new initiatives being developed to support high school students while they were suspended from school.

Building links with key community organizations such as the local council, local inter-agencies, local clubs, and local businesses—especially around specific projects—provided a way of moving towards a more collaborative community-based learning approach in schools. Links to the local council, clubs and inter-agencies could also open up potential funding opportunities such as each local council's community development scheme. Even so, both district and school-based community-focused personnel said that links with the broader community were important but their main focus was links with parents. High school executives also acknowledged the importance of building more effective links with local community organizations, but they did not place a high priority on establishing these links and considered that they had little impact on student learning. Primary school executives did not consider that these types of links would impact on student learning or engagement. High school executives indicated an interest in receiving information about programs and events from local community workers, and in working with those organizations whose programs matched the needs of their school.

Among the community organizations, the community workers felt the main barriers to more effective school–community links were:

- Schools were not interested in community-based projects and initiatives or contact with local community organizations when these projects did not focus on young people and their needs.
- School teachers indicated that involvement with community creates extra work.
- There was often no real reason for a school to establish or maintain a link with a community organization.

Community-based activities were not generally considered to relate to students' learning unless they were related to school learning, such as homework, research and tutorials. Other types of activities that might have been reported but were not mentioned, included participating in leisure activities that involve reading, writing, problem-solving or decision-making; recreational activities like watching TV, playing games, doing hobbies, or group sports; and health maintenance activities (Clark, 1992). We interpret the fact these other activities were not mentioned as an indication that they are not generally viewed as relating to learning, rather than as an indication that they were not taking place.

Conclusion

The two main issues most commonly mentioned as barriers to effective school–community links were lack of time and limited resources. Although participants

acknowledged the importance of school–community links, other concerns took priority. For parents, this was due to juggling work and other family commitments. School personnel expressed a reluctance to be involved, in the absence of specific release time to carry out school–community activities, given all the key functions and tasks they were required to perform within their schools. For district staff, their time pressures related to the large number of schools they had to work with and hence the limited amount of time they were able to spend with each individual school. Community workers faced increasing pressures on their time and few if any of their projects were funded to work with young people in the middle school years or to focus on learning issues with young people, limiting their ability to effectively engage with schools.

The lack of funding and resources for programs was also seen as an important barrier. While policies encouraged school–community interaction, little extra funding was being provided to support and enable projects and new initiatives to develop. Among parents, school and district staff, and community workers there was a view that additional funding was needed to support ongoing activities, but they claimed that funding had been cut back over recent years.

While there are many benefits to be gained from easier access to schools for parents and communities, there are also many benefits to be gained from a broader recognition and acknowledgement of sites of learning beyond the school fence. However, more resources must be allocated for this purpose. Maintenance of current levels of funding may ensure a continuing narrow, albeit necessary, focus on engaging students at risk. Increased funding could be put towards raising the levels of awareness of community organizations of the important educative role they can play – independent but supportive of schools. This is premised on the need to break down the pervasive views that learning *only* takes place at school and that teachers are *the* experts when it comes to curriculum matters.

A core consideration in publicizing and promoting sites of learning beyond schools is the need to challenge deficit views of families and communities, especially those views held by school-based personnel. A particular concern is that teachers and school executives do not generally perceive parents or their local communities as resources for learning. Whilst the participating schools had all made significant attempts to improve basic communication with parents, they generally focused on how they could develop the family to support the school rather than how they could develop the school to support families. We did not observe any initiatives of the type recommended by Cairney (2000) or Connell (1997) that are based on more equal sharing of agendas, open dialogue between parents and teachers, and a concerted effort to value and encourage genuine collaboration and partnership.

There was widespread acknowledgement that schools are busy places and that school-based personnel are already overworked. Whilst this is certainly the case, there is limited recognition of the role that parents and communities might play in easing the burden of schooling and actively supporting teachers and schools. There is limited evidence of the belief that schools need communities as much as communities need their schools (Martin & Tett, 1999). The absence of this belief suggests that school fences function in ways that contain and exclude by signalling that

learning happens within; that those who teach are contained within; and that valued knowledge is constructed within. Sharing power, responsibility and ownership for schooling requires a fundamental reconceptualization of how schools operate within their local communities. There is general belief in the importance of school–community links but our research suggests that systemic leverage, perhaps in the form of targets for community involvement in decision-making, are required in order to move schools towards more democratic processes that are accessible to their communities.

Notes

1. The research was commissioned by the Youth Assistance Strategies Section, NSW Department of Education and Training. The final report *Beyond the school fence: school–community links in the middle years* is published by the Centre for Popular Education at the University of Technology, Sydney.
2. The collaboration was funded by the Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) and the Granville District Office of the NSW Department of Education and Training under its Linkages program that targeted middle years initiatives.

Notes on contributors

Debra Hayes is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia.

Andrew Chodkiewicz is a Research Fellow in the Centre for Popular Education, at the University of Technology, Sydney.

References

- ABS (2002) *2001 Census of population and housing, basic community profiles and snapshots: State suburbs* (Canberra, Australian Bureau of Statistics).
- Bourdieu, P. (1974) The school as a conservative force: scholastic and cultural inequalities, in: J. Eggleston (Ed.) *Contemporary research in the sociology of education* (London, Menthuen), 32–46.
- Cairney, T. H. (2000) Beyond the classroom walls: the rediscovery of the family and community as partners in education, *Educational Review*, 52(2), 163–165.
- Clark, R. M. (1992) Critical factors in why disadvantaged students succeed or fail in school, in: J. H. Johnston & K. M. Borman (Eds) *Effective schooling for economically disadvantaged students: school-based strategies for diverse populations* (Norwood, NJ, Ablex Publishing Corp).
- Connell, R. W. (1997) *Curriculum futures; social and political dimensions: negotiating the curriculum: whose agenda?* (Belconnen, ACT, Australian Curriculum Studies Association).
- Connell, R. W., Ashenden, D. J., Kessler, S. & Dowsett, G. W. (1982) *Making the difference: schools, families and social division* (North Sydney, Allen & Unwin).
- Cumming, J. (1996) *From alienation to engagement: opportunities for reform in the middle years of schooling: key findings and recommendations, Vol 1* (Belconnen, Australian Curriculum Studies Association).
- DET (2001) *Partnerships and alliances in PSFP school communities: an interagency approach* (Sydney, NSW Department of Education and Training).
- DETYA (2001a) *National evaluation report: full service schools program 1999 and 2000* (Canberra, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs).

- DETYA (2001b) *Innovation and best practice in schools: review of literature and practice* (Canberra, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs).
- DETYA (2001c) *Doing it well: case studies of innovation and best practice in working with at risk young people* (Canberra, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs).
- DETYA (2001d) *Full service schools national evaluation, bulletin no. 4*, June (Canberra, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs).
- DSP (1999a) *School-community partnerships: case studies of congruence* (Sydney, NSW Department of Education and Training).
- DSP (1999b) *Raising expectations: achieving quality education for all* (Sydney, NSW Department of Education and Training).
- Fine, M. & Weiss (2003) *Silenced voices and extraordinary conversations: re-imagining schools* (New York, NY, Teachers College Press).
- Gee, J. P. (2000) Cyber-schooling and technological change: multiliteracies for new times, in: B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (eds) for the New London Group, *Multiliteracies: literacy learning and the design of social futures* (London/New York, Routledge).
- Heymann, S. J. & Earle, A. (2000) Low-income parents: how do working conditions affect their opportunity to help school-age children at risk?, *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(4), 833–848.
- Johnston, J. H. (1992) Transition in and out of the middle-level school; the largest crack for disadvantaged youth, in: J. H. Johnston & K. M. Borman (Eds) *Effective schooling for economically disadvantaged students: school-based strategies for diverse populations* (Norwood, NJ, Ablex Pub Corp).
- Lareau, A. (1989) *Home advantage: social class and parental intervention in elementary education*. (London, The Falmer Press).
- Martin, J. & Tett, L. (1999) Developing collaborative partnerships: limits and possibilities for schools, parents and community education, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 9(1), 59–75.
- School of Education, University of Queensland (2001) *The Queensland school reform longitudinal study*. Available online at: http://education.qld.gov.au/public_media/reports/curriculum-framework/qsrls/ (accessed 12 December 2005).
- Shepard, R. G., Trimberger, A. K., McClintock, P. J. & Lecklider, D. (1999) Empowering family-school partnerships: an integrated hierarchical model, *Contemporary Education*, 70(3), 33–38.
- Shumow, L., Vandell, D. L. & Posner, J. (1999) Risk and resilience in the urban neighbourhood: predictors of academic performance among low-income elementary school children, *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 45(2), 309–331.
- Thomson, P. (1998) Against the odds: developing school programmes that make a difference for students and families in communities placed at risk, paper presented at the *National Seminar: Children's Wellbeing at School, Safety, Health and Social Issues in Educational Settings*, University of Otago, New Zealand, 1–2 December.
- Thomson, P. (2002) *Schooling the rustbelt kids: making the difference in changing times* (Crows Nest, Allen & Unwin).
- Young, M. F. (1998) *From curriculum to learning: studies in the sociology of educational knowledge* (Florence, KY, Taylor & Francis).